DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 954 IR 018 367

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TITLE Diversity in Cyborg Images: A Case Study of Barry Levinson's "Toys."
PUB DATE Jan 97
NOTE 7p.; In: VisionQuest: Journeys toward Visual Literacy. Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (28th, Cheyenne, Wyoming, October, 1996); see IR 018 353. Contains photographs which may not reproduce clearly.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Animation; *Characterization; Computer Attitudes; *Films; Man Machine Systems; Metaphors; Popular Culture; *Science and Society; Technology; *Toys
IDENTIFIERS *Cyborgs; Film Reviews; Visual Imagery

ABSTRACT

Associated with the cultural paradigm of postmodernism, the cyborg, in its numerous aspects, has become a predominant metaphor used to describe the relationship between humanity and technology in post-industrial information societies. This case study of Barry Levinson's 1992 comedy film, "Toys," demonstrates some of the many facets of the cyborg. The theme that runs throughout the film and the one thing that all the "Zevos" appear to share in common is their love of gadgetry, or toys. What differs between the military Zevos and the civilian Zevos are their conceptions of what makes a good toy, and what a toy should be good for. It is their mutual love of technology that makes them all exceptional candidates for cyborization. The central message of the film is presented in its first line which is, "If I cannot bring you comfort, then at least I bring you hope..." A description of some of the cyborgization indicators present in the film's characters is provided. Nine figures present reproductions of the characters and a table of characters and their cyborg indicators. (Contains 12 references.) (AEF)

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Diversity In Cyborg Images: A Case Study Of Barry Levinson's *Toys*

by Linda E. Lucek

Abstract

The image of the cyborg is proliferating. Associated with the cultural paradigm of postmodernism, the cyborg, in its numerous aspects, has become a predominant metaphor used to describe the relationship between humanity and technology in post-industrial information societies. This case study of Barry Levinson's 1992 comedy film, *Toys*, is meant to demonstrate some of the many faces of the cyborg.

Introduction

There are various postmodern genres about cyborgs and cyborgization. I will be using the term Cy-Fi here to designate all forms of cyborg fiction.

The overlapping and mutual influence of science fiction and other postmodern fictions has often been noted. Jeff Cupp and Charles Avinger (1993) state:

> Science fiction and fantasy may be considered ephemeral, extra-canonical, or even, heaven forbid, popular genres; however, they offer exactly what many postmodern writers have been looking for--an escape from a reality principle which has come to be perceived as immovable, and an alternative vision of a world which seems to be moving toward its own desolation.

They point out that postmodern writers such as Pynchon, Vonnegut, Marge Piercy, and Stanley Elkin, Garcia Marquex, Calvino, and William S. Burroughs have all written works which could be classified as science fiction or fantasy.

Cultural identity has been defined within the cyberpunk fiction genre as the blackly humorous condition of never fully owning oneself, as exemplified by hybrid, cyborg identities. The technoculture of the cyborg has radically permeated a segment of youth culture which has adopted the name of the science fiction genre it tries to emulate. There is a great deal of evidence showing an increasing influence of cyberpunk and science fiction in general on diverse cultural discourses.

Increasingly, we are being bombarded with cyborg images from literature, film, television, and the discourses of social reality. But how is it that cyborgs can be conceptualized as both killing machines and creative artists? There is new interest in addressing this diversity in cyborg imagery among critics of film and literature.

Scott Bukatman's 1993 book, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, emphasizes how Cy-Fi begins to address the connection between new forms of control and freedom brought into being by a high-tech, postmodern culture and the advances of feminism, minority discourse and ecological inquiries. Nor is he alone. Jenny Wolmark similarly addresses Cy-Fi as social discourse in her book, *Aliens and others: Science fiction, feminism, and postmodernism* (1994), distinguishing between the cyberpunks of the male-dominated genre and cyborgs from feminist science fiction.

> Cyberpunk explores the interface between human and machine in order to focus on the general question of what it means to be human; feminist science fiction has also explored that interface, but in order to challenge those universal and essentialist metaphors about "humanity" which avoid confronting existing and unequal power relations. Cyberpunks and cyborgs can therefore be regarded as related responses to technology that are rooted in gender, and in different ways both seem to

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asked question is "what are the various cyborg discourses being presented here?"

The theme that runs throughout the film and the one thing that all the Zevos appear to share in common is their love of gadgetry, of *toys*. What differs between the military Zevos and the civilian Zevos are their conceptions of what makes a good toy, and what a toy should be good for. (At one point, when one of the General's disguised war toys starts shooting ammunition from a baby bottle, Alsatia says "That's a very *bad* baby!")

It is their mutual love of technology that makes them all exceptional candidates for cyborgization. But I hope it will become apparent, that I do not use the term "cyborg" or employ that concept in a disparaging way. Rather, my point is that cyborgization can come in many flavors, not solely the typical terminator. I will briefly recount some of the cyborgization indicators present in the film's characters.

Kenneth

Kenneth Zevo has only a minor technological implant -- his pacemaker, which is connected to his beanie propeller as an early warning system. It was much more than cosmetic, however, considering its life-extending functionality. His affinity for technology took the form of whimsical gadgets.

Figure 1
TOYMAKER KENNY

Leslie

Leslie, the film's hero, continually appears manipulating or wearing various gadgets throughout. Novelty apparel is one of his specialties. At one early point in the film, he strides through the toy factory, with great billows of smoke streaming behind him. He's wearing a "smoking jacket" that makes him look like a walking smoke bomb or powerful wizard. In this fashion, he *appears* to be a commanding cyborg presence. Later, we see him wearing a body-sound jacket, wired to make different wild sounds depending on how he moves. It is merely a guise, however, a cosmetic technology that he can put on or take off. His power is nothing *but* smoke, for while incorporating his father's whimsical ideals, Leslie has never been forced into the harsh realities of leadership, power struggles, and responsibility and thus, at the film's outset, he remains a boy with his toys.

Figure 2
LESLIE SMOKES

The General (Leland)

The General is another boy with toys, but molded in his own father's image. He takes everything (himself included) *too* seriously, except (in that paradoxical twist) humanity. The outcomes of war have been separated from his consciousness like the severing of the corpus callosum, so that his right side does not truly understand what his left is about. He is excited by the prospects of training and using children as war machines. "Let the games begin" he says just before the final showdown. He watches the battle simulation on his security system with glee as scores are tallied in video game fashion, but the scores represent the actual stalking and destruction of his own relatives by his mechanical creations. He is a military cyborg, as is his son, Patrick.

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Patrick

Patrick also has a propensity for extending his functionality through technology--espionage bugs, x-ray cameras, the security "nerve center." *The Terminator*'s cyborg, the T-800 (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) has a metallic endoskeleton covered with flesh, while these military cyborgs have symbolically hard *exteriors*. Alsatia tells her cousin Patrick that he reminds her of Leslie. When Patrick protests that they are the exact opposite, she responds "Exactly", because Leslie is all silly and soft on the outside but strong on the inside while Patrick is the exact opposite. Patrick has a penchant for novelty apparel similar to his cousin's but, being a military cyborg, it manifests as camouflage costumes.

Figure 3
PATRICK IN CAMOUFLAGE

Old General

Like his son, the old invalid General's eyes light up when he anticipates the excitement of the impending toy war.

Happy Workers

This film's soundtrack is exceptional. One song, entitled *Happy Workers*, is choreographed with visual images of the toy factory assembly line workers doing their jobs in energetic style. They are integrated in a positive way with the company's technology, "joyous in [their] industry". While factory work is often held up as dehumanizing, it is being portrayed here as satisfying in a supportive corporate culture. The "happy workers" soon become disgruntled and start leaving once the military faction begins to take over.

Figure 4
HAPPY WORKERS ASSEMBLY LINE

Security Workers

The General's new security personnel are just following orders, like programmed machines. They march through the factory in formation to a military beat. Suddenly photographic identification is required of everyone in the company. A culture of fear and intimidation is generated. Barbed wire and monitoring devices start to pop up.

Child Workers

In the restricted area, Leslie finds the children who are testing the General's video wargames. They barely notice him, being mesmerized by their games and concentrating on accumulating their points by blowing up military bases, people, army tanks, and helicopters. A thousand points are scored for blowing up people.

The General has hopes of starting daycare centers (a philanthropic gesture) in poverty areas, where welfare mothers can leave their children all day long and they can be taught to read and write using video computer programs. In addition, he plans to create a special variety of programs to develop hand-eye coordination, train children in the use of sophisticated equipment, simulated flight experiments, and visual laser lock-on. The culmination of the children's daycare training would be "flying" an actual combat mission using remote-control weaponry while the kids still think they're playing a game.

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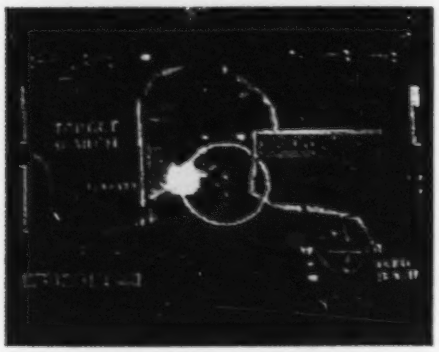
Sea Swine

The "classic" cyborg formulation, the *thorough* blending of technology and organism is to be found in this film in the experimental amphibious sea swine, another military cyborg that appears vaguely similar to a hippopotamus equipped with robotic optical scanner, automatic weapons, and backup system. Leslie "discovers" it in the General's restricted area, when he breaks in, falls into its pit, and it attacks him. The lock-on laser targeting of the Sea Swine looks amazingly similar to that of the T-800 cyborg in *The Terminator* film. In true classic fashion, this technology later malfunctions, turning on its creator (the General).

Figure 5
SEA SWINE'S LOCK-ON LASER TARGETING THE GENERAL



Alsatia

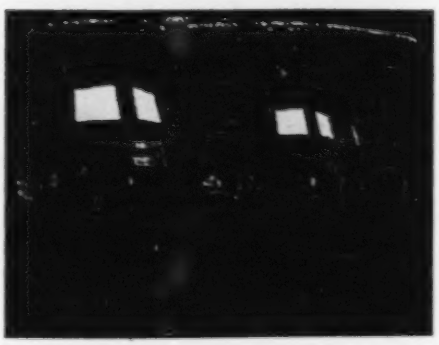
Alsatia becomes an obvious possibility for cyborg candidacy, once it becomes apparent that she is an AI (artificial intelligence). It might be argued that she is a *robot* rather than a cyborg. However, it seems inconsequential whether her flesh is more or less *artificial* than that of *The Terminator's* T-800 when considering the dominant function she was meant to perform. She was designed by her father to be a human sister to Leslie and she fulfills that role quite successfully.

Although she has helped to test some of her brother's high-technology creations, such as a virtual reality system they call the "Woozy Helmet", Alsatia's own work at Zevo Toys is less technology oriented. She also wears novelty apparel, but it is limited to trying out all the paper doll fashions on herself. She is an *Amish* cyborg, sticking simply with the basics. She calls her dolls and doll fashions "endearing" and employs creativity and artistry in her work.

Alsatia's military-minded cousin, Patrick, doesn't realize that she was engineered until the sea swine blows her head off. Then he comments "Alsatia's a *robot?* ... I always thought she seemed the same age." An immediate mental disparity is generated when he calls her a *robot.* It stems from the juxtaposition of the image of Alsatia in her paper doll "office" with the image of the numerous military robots being manufactured in the General's restricted area. (Compare Figure 6 below with Figure 7 which follows.)

Figure 6
ALSATIA IN DOLL CLOTHES

Figure 7
THE GENERAL'S ROBOTS



With springs hanging out, Alsatia's disembodied head asks Leslie "Do you--do

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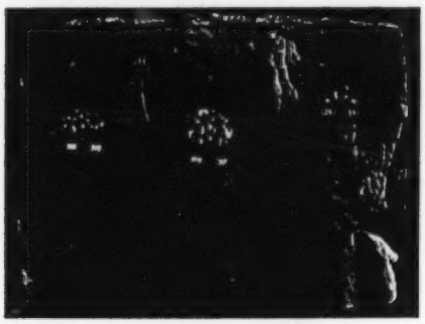
you *love* me?", next proclaiming (in Tin Woodsman fashion) "I miss my heart." Unlike the General, she had a heart all along. What she and Leslie both lacked initially was the grown-up courage (in Cowardly Lion fashion) to fight with the General to uphold their principles.

Toys

The original factory toys and new military toys are intimately involved in the cyborg narratives of the film. Some, such as the Woozy Helmet are worn by the characters and integrate technology with their senses.

Figure 8
SHARED VIRTUAL REALITY USING THE WOOZY HELMET



Although the toys are not sentient, they are often anthropomorphized--especially when the toys become the army in the final battle scene. Little wind-up bears seem to care about each other when shot, little penguins appear agitated when knocked down by a military jeep, a wind-up child and dog appear to escape into the night.

The Closing of the Year

While the film depicts a hero's journey for Leslie, at the same time it is presenting a hopeful metaphor for the rest of us. The film begins and ends during the joyous company Christmas celebration. It is a whimsical yet sacred time, a time of hierophanies, cyclically surrounding a transitional, liminal year.

The song that both opens and closes the film is *The Closing of the Year*. The central message of the film is presented in its first line which is "If I cannot bring you comfort, then at least I bring you hope...." We are not to be made comfortable or less vigilant in our struggle, but at least we should know there is hope.

The International Children's Choir doing the singing (along with Wendy Melvoin) is positioned in a Christmas tree formation. At the closing celebration, we think we hear the dreaded sea swine again, only to be shown that it is only the innocent play of the wind-up alligator making similar sounds and then we see that the victorious, wholesome toys appear where the children had previously in the tree.

The cherished airplane that carries Santa Claus into the spectacular mock-up of downtown Manhattan during the celebration is a sharp contrast to the film's many remote-control combat planes involved in destructive pursuits.

Summary

Shown below in Figure 9 is a summary table of the cyborg indicators which I found in the characters of this comedy film.

Figure 9
CYBORG CHARACTERIZATIONS IN *TOYS*

Character	Cyborg Indicators
Kenneth	implanted pacemaker connected to beanie propeller
Leslie	love of whimsical toys; novelty apparel
General	love of war toys
Patrick	camouflage apparel, mechanisms of espionage
Old General	eyes alight at the prospect of war
Happy Workers	well-integrated into factory mission
Security Workers	unquestioning military compliance with orders
Child Workers	innocently/naively interfaced with war videogames
Sea Swine	"classic" cyborg; made of flesh and bolts; turns on its creator
Alsatia	"robot" sister
Toys	majority on both "sides" were anthropomorphized

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I hope that I have demonstrated through this exercise that cyborg characteristics are not in and of themselves good or bad. Rather, they are a consequence of the postmodern world we currently live in.

Cyborg images can take as many possible forms as we have possible futures and it is always up to us to maintain vigilance in guiding their development.

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